SR 520 Trans-Lake Washington Project Frequently Asked Questions – 2002

The SR 520 Trans-Lake Washington Project is moving into detailed environmental review and project design. We hear questions from the public about all aspects of the project, many of which are addressed below.

Why does SR 520 need to be replaced?

The Evergreen Point Floating Bridge and the rest of the SR 520 facility opened in the 1960s, built according to the design standards of that day. Today, the floating portions of the bridge and its fixed approaches are near the end of their design lives. They become less and less reliable in storms, and face significant earthquake risk. The bridge must be closed when high winds come up, and it faces a 1-in-20 risk of severe damage in an earthquake. The roadway does not have adequate shoulders or pullout lanes, and bikes and pedestrians must cross the lake over I-90. Westbound high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes do not continue on the bridge, so transit loses its travel time advantage, and the merging traffic at the east shore causes a bottleneck.

What are the benefits that we get with a new SR 520?

A new SR 520 will add capacity for people and goods crossing the lake. A new 6-lane facility (2 general-purpose and one HOV lane in each direction), the currently favored option, would carry about 215,000 people a day in 2020, as compared with 173,000 for a 4-lane facility and 294,000 for an 8-lane facility. Today's facility carries about 145,000 people per day, and will carry an estimated 183,000 in 2020 if no action is taken. Travel time would be reduced as well. The 6-lane facility would allow crossing westbound in the morning peak in 36 minutes for a general-purpose vehicle, as opposed to 69 minutes for a 4-lane facility. HOV users would find their westbound trip reduced to 8 minutes between 124th Ave NE and I-5. Standard-sized shoulders, lengthened on-ramps, a straightened alignment, improved interchange designs, and other design features will add to safety and reliability.

Environmental benefits will also be part of the new project. Stringent new stormwater management regulations apply to a new highway project, requiring treatment of stormwater runoff which today goes into Lake Washington. New structures can be designed to reduce impacts of footings and piers, and the "ramps to nowhere" in the Arboretum will be removed. There will be some impacts on wetlands, parks and trails, but work is ongoing to avoid or minimize those encroachments. Impacts that cannot be eliminated will be mitigated by creating or rehabilitating parks and wetlands as close to the corridor as possible. Reducing congestion and adding transit and HOV opportunities means moving more people with less air pollution. Conservation of threatened and endangered species of fish and wildlife will also be an important feature of the new project.

What is a preliminary preferred alternative? Why has one been selected already?

Three primary options are moving forward for detailed review: 4-lane, 6-lane, and 8-lane corridor designs. They have been identified after a thorough study of many ideas and extensive work with the jurisdictions and neighborhoods along the corridor. Full environmental review will be done on all three alternatives, with continuing opportunity for public and agency input and interaction.

However, the state and regional funding process has overtaken the project decision structure. The urgency of defining a project for purposes of estimating needed funding is being driven by formulation of the regional funding ballot by the Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID). That three-county group plans to put a funding package on the ballot in spring of 2003. In order to have the SR 520 Trans-Lake project included in the funding package, the Executive Committee reached a decision to identify the 6-lane roadway, with bridge pontoons strengthened to allow future expandability for high-capacity transit, as a preliminary preferred alternative. It is just that, preliminary. The EIS will examine all three alternatives fully, and a final preferred alternative will only be identified later in the EIS process.

What role do tolls play in funding the project?

The Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID), in its preliminary estimates for project funding, has assumed a level of tolling for the SR 520 project, as well as other mega-projects in the Puget Sound area. The specifics of that analysis – what portion of the corridor would be tolled, how much the toll would be, for how long, etc. – are far from being worked out. Modern technologies for collecting tolls do mean that extensive toll plaza areas would not be needed, and delays could be minimized by using electronic toll collection methods. The tolling discussion will continue over the next few years in the region.

What is the schedule for the project and when will the improvements be operating?

It has taken several years of work with the jurisdictions and neighborhoods in the corridor to come to agreement on the three alternatives now ready for detailed analysis. Assuming that funding is available later this fall through the statewide funding ballot, the project will move ahead quickly in both environmental review and continuation of design. A draft EIS is planned to be issued in the spring of 2004, with a final in fall 2004. Construction could start in 2006/2007 on the first critical phase of the project – at a minimum the floating bridge itself and its fixed approaches. Funds being discussed as part of the RTID ballot next spring appear to be sufficient to build that much of the corridor, and perhaps to add eastbound HOV lanes from Lake Washington to Bellevue Way or other important connections. Construction of the rest of the corridor would need to await a second round of funding.

Is the SR 520 project about safety or congestion relief?

Both. The region came together to try to find better ways to move people and goods across the lake, and to improve conditions in the neighborhoods crossed by SR 520. At the same time, the barge/bridge accident a few years ago pointed out that the bridge is more fragile than previously thought, and the corridor an essential one to both sides of the lake. Emerging studies also began to indicate that earthquake risk was greater than we realized, about a 1 in 20 chance of losing the bridge in the next serious earthquake. Replacing at least the bridge itself and its approaches, and ultimately the Portage Bay Viaduct, are high priorities for the region.

The existing SR 520 has negatively impacted neighborhoods on both sides of the lake. How will impacts to these communities be mitigated?

From the beginning of the Trans-Lake Washington Study in 1998 there has been a broad commitment that mitigation and enhancements will be developed "integral to and inseparable from" the project options. Traditionally, mitigation and enhancements are not considered until the EIS evaluates the impacts of a project. In the SR 520 Trans-Lake Washington Project, discussions with neighborhoods and the public have been under way for several years to identify and work toward mitigating existing and expected impacts. Potential impacts to be mitigated include noise (extensive preliminary modeling has been done to predict likely noise reductions) and neighborhood connections (preliminary design of lids to cover the freeway and enhance local and bike/pedestrian travel). Local traffic modeling is under way to predict impacts on local streets and arterials and to see what changes might be needed to mitigate those impacts. The three current corridor alternatives reflect extensive input from neighborhoods and jurisdictions, and extensive design and environmental work, to define options that avoid and minimize negative impacts to the maximum extent possible, and that make the corridor a better place to live, work, and travel. Collaboration between residents, jurisdictions, and the project team will continue.

Is the focus just on cars?

The new SR 520 will allow people to travel in many ways. Even the first likely phase options include new HOV lanes on the bridge and connections to eastside HOV lanes. This will provide a travel advantage for transit and high-occupancy vehicles. With the full project, a form of "bus rapid transit" or BRT is included, functioning in the HOV lanes, and adding transit capacity, speed, and reliability. We assume that HOV lanes are for three or more people in a vehicle; by the time they are built, 2-passenger HOV lanes will be just as crowded as a general-purpose lane. A bike and pedestrian lane is included in the plans, and improved transit access facilities such as flyer stops will make travel by different modes easier and faster. And finally, the pontoons on the floating portion of the bridge are likely to be built with enough flotation to allow expansion of the bridge in the long term to accommodate some form of high-capacity transit in the corridor.

What are the impacts that are expected on the communities in the corridor?

Environmental evaluation of potential impacts from different options has been under way for some time, and more detailed analysis will begin in January 2003. The project will consider wetlands and other sensitive areas, parks and trails, residential and commercial property displacements, and land required for new right of way. Other areas of environmental review include air, water, and noise pollution; impacts on threatened and endangered species; land use changes; and other key features. Traffic modeling will help project the effect that the new facility will have on freeway and transit operation as well as on community arterial streets. As impacts are evaluated, strategies to avoid and mitigate those impacts will be integral to the analysis.

Noise is a big issue today. Can it be made better?

Today's SR 520 is noisy, and there has really been no noise mitigation for the neighborhoods. The project has looked already at ways in which noise walls could significantly reduce today's noise levels, and believes that more detailed modeling and design will confirm that prediction. The objective of noise walls is to block the noise – putting the barrier closest to the source or closest to the receiver. Tradeoffs are inherent in this design, but all decisions will be made in consultation with the communities. Placement of noise walls, wall heights, and designs to make them as aesthetically pleasing as possible, are all decisions that have yet to be made. Some corridor residents believe strongly that lidding the roadway is a preferable way to reduce noise and enhance community connections. The project has worked hard to identify areas where lids would enhance or reestablish connections across the freeway. Current plans call for lids at key locations in the corridor that may range from 500 to 600 feet or more in length, but will be short enough not to require mechanical ventilation.

How wide will the new facility be?

With current standards for lane design and the bicycle/pedestrian lane, the new roadway will be about 94 feet for the 4-lane option, 140 feet for the 6-lane, and 184 feet for an 8-lane roadway. People are concerned about the "footprint" of the facility, and the team has worked with individual communities to try to refine the alignment to minimize impacts. That dialogue will continue as design moves forward.

Who represents me in the decision-making process?

The project has been advised by three committees to this point. The Technical Committee consists of jurisdictional staff and natural resource agency representatives, who provide input on the environmental and design review processes. An Advisory Committee includes community members, interest group representatives, and other interests in the corridor, and provides advice on all aspects of the project. And finally, the Executive Committee is composed of elected officials and agency heads from all affected jurisdictions. It is the Executive Committee that is asked to reach agreement on key project decisions, informed by input from the other two committees. The Executive Committee, for example, selected the alternatives for EIS analysis last winter, and

recently endorsed the 6-lane facility (with high-capacity transit expandability) as the preliminary preferred alternative.

*Additional information on the SR 520 Trans-Lake Washington Project is available in other portions of the project website (**www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/translake**). If you have additional questions that have not been addressed here, please let us know at translake@wsdot.wa.gov, or call the project dialogue center at (206) 448-6611.*